

## **“College of Direct Support” Demonstration Project Leads to Statewide Implementation of the Program in Virginia**

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Virginia’s Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services (DMHMRSAS) is committed to transforming the quality of services for Virginians with disabilities. We envision a consumer-driven system of services and supports that promotes self-determination, empowerment, recovery, resilience, health, and consumer participation in all aspects of community life.

Virginia struggles, as do other states, with difficulties in recruiting and retaining the numbers and quality of direct support professionals (DSPs) needed by Virginians with disabilities. Factors associated with these difficulties include limited and inconsistent training; few career opportunities; and lack of continuing education contributing to job performance and career advancement.

As Manager of Workforce Development of Virginia’s DMHMRSAS, the challenges of securing the size and quality of workforce needed by Virginians with disabilities requires me to examine innovative approaches to recruitment, retention, and training of our current and future workforce. In examining these approaches, I was drawn to the growing number of training programs moving from classroom to distance learning. These programs seemed more flexible because of our work schedules and locations. I personally believe that modern training technology could contribute substantially to building a highly competent, stable DSP workforce. I also knew that budget constraints compelled evaluation of efficiency and effectiveness of any program before implementation in Virginia.

In early 2003 we began to investigate the College of Direct Support (CDS) as a candidate for training of DSPs in Virginia. We found its design features relatively easy to use; we felt its National Advisory Board representing leading national organizations and Editorial Board of national content experts provided high standards for quality and validity. We liked that it was available at anytime and anywhere and that all improvements and updates were immediately available to all users, unlike CD ROM or print curricula.

In May 2003, Virginia’s Department of Business Assistance provided grant funds to help support a CDS demonstration, which included DSPs of 9 private agencies, 5 community service boards, and 2 state facilities. The demonstration program began in March 2004. Participants included both current and new hires of participating agencies. In all, 315 learners participated in the demonstration, using the CDS “Introductory” curriculum of 11 courses and 56 lessons. These learners spent more than 13,000 hours completing more than 15,700 lessons, with an 85% completion rate at the 80% post-test criterion for lesson completion.

Participants provided a total of 735 course ratings on dimensions of quality, applicability, and ease of use. Among the findings were: a) on 94% of all course ratings, learners agreed that the course they tested was "an excellent course;" b) 93% agreed that they "learned something they can use in their work situation;" c) 93% agreed that “the convenience of web-based learning increased their opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge.”

Because 76% of participating DSPs had not gone beyond a two-year college degree, there was initial concern about their ease in using the technology. But 95% of all participants agreed that CDS courses were "easy to access and use"; and 93% agreed that the technology worked effectively. Training managers reported that more time was spent initially with learners who were less computer literate, but that extra help was not a long-term need. In fact, some of the least experienced computer users were most positive about their CDS experience. One DSP noted, "If I am going to encourage the individuals I support to move out of their comfort zones, I must be willing to do the same".

With successful demonstration of its benefits, financing was secured to offer CDS statewide to state facilities, an extension of the grant funds to add additional private providers and a discount for the community service boards to participate. A CDS "kick-off" occurred in August 2005 with informational sessions across Virginia to introduce CDS and demonstrate procedures for enrolling learners and using the learner management and human resources tools. We believe CDS will open up new pathways to career opportunities, potential for promotion, greater career satisfaction and a culture of continuing education. We are also excited about applicability of the curriculum for DSPs of persons with mental illness.

With support of James Reinhard, M.D., Commissioner of our DMHMRSAS, a valuable workforce development tool has been made available across Virginia. To me, CDS is an exceptional curriculum to enhance one of our most valuable human resources, the direct support professional. With CDS we can provide quality, consistency, and innovative training that improves the quality of life for our consumers.

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